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THE TENTH REPORT OF THE VERMONT BOARD OF AGRICULTURE.

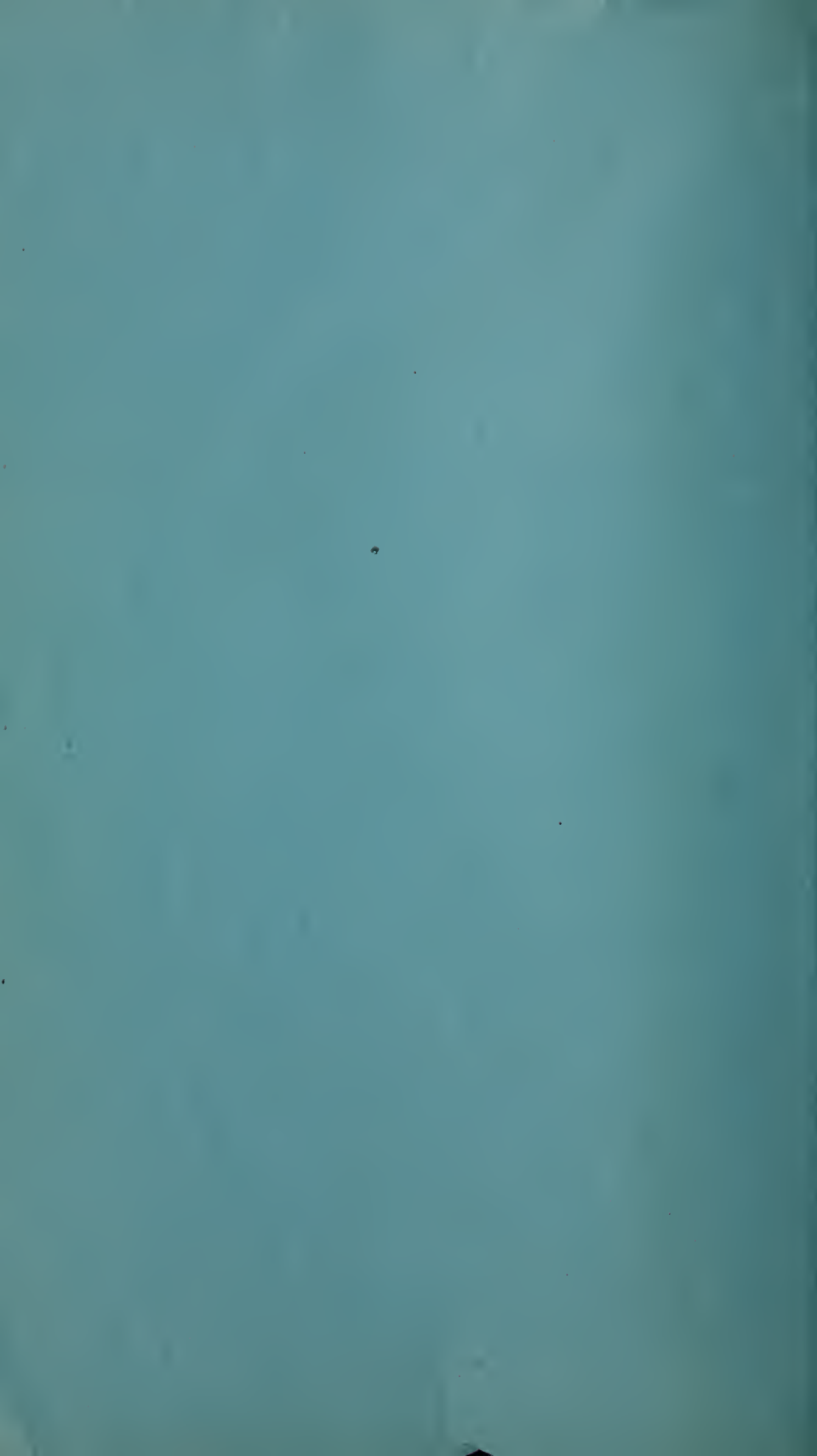
THE
FARMERS DISCUSS EDUCATION

BY

PRESIDENT M. H. BUCKHAM.



BURLINGTON:
FREE PRESS ASSOCIATION.
1888.



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In a newspaper report of a farmer's meeting in this State, I find that the following resolution was presented for debate:

Resolved, That education is as necessary for the Farmers as for any of the other classes.

The report says that the resolution after being fully discussed was adopted. I should have very much liked to hear that debate. Much good sound sense, I venture to say, got utterance then and there. I especially like the form and spirit of the resolution. It does not content itself with the usual common-places about the benefits of education, or with the statement, which nobody denies, that education to be beneficial must be practical, or with criticism on prevailing methods of education. It says boldly that education is necessary, that it is necessary for all classes, and that it is just as necessary for the farmers as for any of the other classes. I understand the farmers to say that in their opinion it is just as necessary for a farmer to be educated as for a lawyer or a minister of the gospel. These are brave words. They have the true ring of New England intelligence and enterprise. I wonder if any voice was raised against the adoption of the resolution, and if so by what arguments the opposition was sustained. I can imagine some aristocrat in foreign lands or some demagogue in this country secretly opposing the education of the agricultural class for the reason that this class, the most numerous in the State, could not so easily be held in subjection or managed for political ends if they were lifted by education into a sense of their own manhood and power. We have heard of a royal governor of Virginia who thanked God that there were in that colony no free schools or printing presses. I have heard in our own time, and in a New England State, the doctrine maintained by professed friends of the people, that too much education is spoiling the American race for manual crafts, and that in the interest of the industrial arts we must call a halt in educational progress and go back to the good old notion that the three R's give education enough to those who are to work with their hands. And worst of all I have heard farmers themselves argue that too much education would educate our young men away from the farm, and therefore ought to be frowned upon and resisted. I should have liked to hear, if these views were brought forward, how the Vermont Farmers met them in sustaining this resolution. I should have liked to hear the outburst of honest indignation at the suggestion that men of other classes were debating how much education it was safe to let the farmers have without danger of losing political control of these same farmers. I think

there would have been some sport in that meeting if somebody had hinted that the Vermont farmer is a farmer simply because he does not know enough to be anything else.

But this resolution, is, as I take it, always in order in any meeting of farmers. I beg leave to offer it again to this meeting:

"Resolved, That education is as necessary for Farmers as for any of the other classes."

I maintain the affirmative of the resolution, Mr. Chairman. First, because education is necessary for maintaining the respectability and dignity of the class of farmers. The New England farmer belongs by right of inheritance to an educated class, and he ought never to forget it or suffer it to be forgotten. He is the descendant of a race of men who were themselves educated, and who took great pains to transmit institutions and traditions of education to their posterity. The early settlers of New England, the founders of its social and political institutions, were picked men. They were not ordinary emigrants, failures in their native land, soldiers of fortune, as are so many colonists. They were very largely men and women of good birth, of good education, of gentle manners, carrying with them high conceptions of what a Christian social and civil life requires and implies. A highly significant fact is the large proportion among the early immigrants of college bred men. It has been ascertained that in the first twenty-five years of the New England settlements at least a hundred graduates of Oxford and Cambridge were among the colonists. And when we remember that in these men high moral and religious characteristics were joined with intellectual attainments and gave them direction and force, it ceases to be a wonder that they laid so wisely the foundations of government and society, and incorporated such noble ideas of liberty, of education, and of morality, into the framework of social life. From such a select, such, in the best sense, an aristocratic ancestry the New England farmer is descended. All through New England history the influence of such an ancestry has been effective in keeping up the intellectual and moral standard of New England farm life. The traditions, usages, modes of thought, opinions, prejudices even, of the New England farmers as a class, have been those, not of an illiterate, but an educated class. The books they have had in their houses, the sermons they have listened to, the discussions on public questions in the farmers' door yard, on the meeting-house steps, round the stove of the country store in winter, all proclaim them a reading, thinking, intelligent class of people. And for this reason they have always been a respected and a self respecting class. They have always held up their heads in the presence of any other class. Socially they have been accounted the equals of any other class. Their sons have married the daughters and their daughters the sons of merchants, professional and literary men, without suspicion of inequality. There has never been a longer step to any office or dignity from the farm house than from any other house in the land.

Now let me ask you to consider what the effect would have been if the class of New England farmers had begun their career in this

country and continued it under different auspices and influences, if they had not inherited from an educated and self respecting ancestry those traditions and opinions which foster intelligence and reflection and independent judgment among farmers as a class. In the agricultural laborers and peasants of the old world, in the poor whites of our Southern States, behold your answer. And the effect would be the same here and now, if farmers as a class should abandon their inherited and time honored principles and suffer themselves and their posterity gradually to sink to the level of an uneducated class. They would lose their social status. They would lose their own self-respect. They would become an inferior class. Next to genuine Christianity, the parent of all true democracy, there is no such leveler as education. It levels up and not down. On the broad tableland where religion and education bring together in equality and in co-operation the true aristocracy, the New England farmer has hitherto had a recognized place. May he never lose it.

I am in favor of the farmers' resolution, secondly, because education is necessary to the farmers in order that they may hold their own amid the sharp competitions of modern life. If competition is the life of business, there is no lack in our time of that which makes business lively. To do any kind of business in our time is to be obliged to do it in the face of eager competitors all around, and woe to the man who enters the competition without the requisite training and capacity. It is in vain to decry this universal spirit of rivalry, and to wish ourselves back in the slow old fashioned times. We must make the best of what seems to be a permanent characteristic of civilization.

Until comparatively recent times the New England farmer has felt the force of competition to but a limited extent. Every farmer had about the same ways of doing things, with almost uniform results. A moderate and safe competence was assured to him. He had no need to disquiet himself over the fluctuations incident to other employments; he had no need to be in a great hurry about anything. Summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, were among the surest and most regular things in nature. Some farmers were a little richer than others, some a little poorer, but none were really rich and few positively poor. But all this is now changed. Competition has at last reached the farmer. The extension of markets, the opening up of the West, the facilities of transportation, the influence of foreigners eager to own land and ready to sell all its produce but the merest parings, have cut away the broad and easy margins between cost of production and market-value out of which the old New England farmer got so comfortable a maintenance. Farming, like other kinds of business, must now get its profits out of fractional advantages. System, careful calculation, foresight, exact business habits, are now as necessary in farming as in other pursuits. And here is where education tells, and here is one good reason why education is as necessary to the farmers as to any of the other classes, because all classes alike yield their prizes to the most capable, and leave to fall out by the way those whom Carlyle calls

the unable. Farming is coming to be more and more a business, a matter of contrivance, of ways and means, of adaptations and adjustments, in short an art and not merely an industry. Success depends almost if not quite as much on what the farmer does in his office as on what he does in the field. Intelligence is the farmer's best implement, and best hand, and best fertilizer. It cannot supply the place of capital, but it doubles the value of capital. It cannot do away with the necessity of labor, but it makes every stroke of labor tell for more.

But granting the value of intelligence, does it follow, asks some one, that education, the education gotten in schools and from books, is of any great avail in practical farming? Are the best educated men in any town always the best farmers? The answer to this fair question is that while education counts for something and for a good deal, it does not count for everything. Success is a sum total made up of a good many items. Ancestry, health, native endowments of body, mind and will, good training in habits and principles, good sense, all these things and many others by their combination make up success or failure. Education is an important factor in the problem but is insufficient to secure success without combination with others. Education combined with poor endowment, or deficient energy, or ill-regulated habits, or scant good sense, is not a match for a large amount of these elements combined with a limited education. The fair way to put the question is whether, taking each man as he is, education adds something to what he would be without it, or adds enough to pay for its cost. On that point the judgment and experience of mankind are clear and decisive. The average educated man in any pursuit whatever is superior to the average uneducated man. And especially as producer, as creator of wealth, the educated man is by many degrees the superior of the uneducated man. Philosophy, observation, statistics have confirmed each other in putting that statement beyond dispute. And inasmuch as other vocations are to a large extent availing themselves of this principle, and are calling to their aid the best systems of education that can be devised, the farmer also, who would make the most of himself in his calling, needs education, and the best possible education, in order to maintain himself by the side of the men in other callings with whom he is in necessary competition.

I am in favor of this resolution, also, because education is needed by the farmer to qualify him for the public duties which he is called upon to discharge. A farmer is more than a farmer, he is a man among men. Here in Vermont, especially, he is a potent factor in all public affairs. Numerically the farming class outvote all other classes combined. The votes of farmers decide almost all social and political issues. They make our laws, they elect our magistrates, they determine what shall be our school policy. Farmers appoint ministers in the great majority of churches, they outnumber all others on juries, they contribute in short the preponderating element in all civil, ecclesiastical and educational affairs. No

measure of reform can be put in operation if the farmers as a class oppose it, none can fail if they are determined to carry it. If it were not that farmers are sure to be found on both sides of every public question, we should be in danger of falling under a class tyranny. And they have not only the weight of numbers. They have also, as possessors of the soil, a sort of prescriptive right to say their say and be heard, a kind of territorial authority, which other men feel and recognize. A man who owns 200 acres of land can stand up among his fellows in town meeting and in a way lord it over the shop-keeper, and the citizen. I have already alluded to the high standard of intellectual and moral character which the New England farmers as a class have hitherto maintained. It is of the utmost consequence that this standard should be maintained in the interest of good legislation, good civil administration, and good morals. Imagine, which may Heaven forbid, that the farms of Vermont should one by one, pass into the hands of people of another race, not having the intelligence and moral characteristics of the old-time New England farmer, a race not trained to reading, and reflection, and self control, not friendly to schools and academies and colleges, so that the farm-homes would be destitute of books and newspapers, the vigorous intellectual sermon and the stimulating Sunday school instruction be heard no more in the country meeting-house. What a change would inevitably come over our legislation, our judicial administration, our school system, all our public offices! What a different body our legislature would be, what a different kind of men they would choose for judges, what justices of the peace would be commissioned, what grand juries! What a riot of free rum, and the consequent assaults, and murders, and arson, would there be! Who of us would want to remain in Vermont in such a condition of things? Though its hills were as green as ever, its valleys as smiling, its brooks as sparkling, though every prospect pleased, yet should we not, refer some region, however unattractive in which men were intelligent, and women refined, and society well-ordered, and public offices filled with capable men, and the State, in its various functions, administered according to the enlightened policy now established among the wisest and most advanced nations?

I hope that this discussion will have prepared us for two practical suggestions which I venture to make. The first has reference to the public schools of Vermont, especially those in the country districts. It seems to be generally admitted that our country schools are in a condition of decay. While our graded and union schools are kept well up with the best in other States, our district schools are, on the average, not only behind those of most other Northern States, but are inferior to what they used to be in former generations. Now this is a very serious fact for us all to consider, and especially serious for the farmers. For these are, in the main, their schools. Theirs is the responsibility for their maintenance: theirs the shame and loss for their failure: theirs the power to make them what they should be. I know that the problem pre-

sents difficulties. The changed character of the population; the increase of villages at the expense of the rural population; the new methods of education favoring the massing of pupils under a general system; these considerations, and others, have made the problem of common school education different from what it used to be, and demand if not an entire revolution, yet a reconsideration of our public school system. A Commission of competent men is now engaged in maturing a plan which shall meet the demands of the case. Now what I would like to say to the farmers of Vermont, if I could get their ear, would be this: Meet this coming question with the intelligence and public spirit with which in past times the farmers of New England have always met such questions. Understand that the case is urgent; that one of the vital questions of human welfare is before you; that the character of the country schools determines largely the character and standing of your children, of your class, and of the general population. If there are men among you who look at the question solely with a view to the lowest possible taxation, see that the higher and larger aspects of the question get a hearing, in town-meeting and elsewhere. Send to the next Legislature men to whom such a great interest can be safely entrusted. For many years past there has been in our Legislature a conspicuous dearth of men who have distinguished themselves in their communities by their zeal in public education, and who could be counted on to look carefully after this paramount public interest. Conservatism is one of the farmer's virtues; but do not be too conservative; do not stand still and let all the rest of the world go by you. If the Commission, or any other competent judges, recommend any change that seems to be demanded by changes in other things, do not cling to any outworn and obsolete system. Let us have in every town in Vermont the best schools that the circumstances will admit.

The other suggestion pertains to what may be called the "New Farming" of our day. Science having introduced improvements into almost every other art has at last taken hold of farming, and is working vigorously upon some of its great problems. It cannot be claimed that science has, as yet, accomplished for agriculture any of those wonders which it has achieved in some other arts. Some over zealous and hasty advocates of scientific farming have claimed too much for alleged discoveries, and the resulting disappointment has brought discredit and suspicion upon the whole movement. It is wise to be moderate in all our expectations of improvements in agricultural processes. The gains of the farmer will always be slow, his labor will always be heavy, and his utmost reward will be but a competence. But for all that, farming is capable of indefinite improvement, and we are witnessing in our times a good beginning therein. The new farming is trying to understand the processes of nature in order to manage them. "How crops grow," "how plants feed," "why rotation is beneficial," these are questions which we put to nature in order to be able by means of the answers to make larger crops grow, and to provide better food for plants, and to make each

crop contribute to the next in order. Now an intelligent farmer will want to know something about all these researches which are being made for his benefit. Horace Mann said that you might hire an immigrant to shovel a heap of sand backward and forward all day and he would never want to know the use of it, if you only paid him, but that you never could persuade or hire a Yankee to do it. He must know the reason of what he is doing. Shall an intelligent farmer put a spoonful of some fertilizer in each hill of corn, and not want to know something about phosphates, soluble, insoluble and reverted? An expert chemist he cannot well be, and need not be, but he ought to know enough so that a pretended chemist, or a humbug compounder of fertilizers, cannot impose upon him. The New England farmer has always been something of a philosopher. There is now abundant room and call for his philosophy in investigating, judging and testing the many novelties which are recommended to him as improvements in farming. This is the farmer's part in the new farming. The professors' part is to discover the facts and laws of vegetable and animal life and to suggest possible applications of them to the improvement of plants and animals. It is the farmers' part to materialize these abstractions into practical experiments.

And it ought to cheer and encourage the farmer in his work that so much aid is being extended to him in this direction. Twenty-five years ago Congress appropriated public lands the proceeds of which were to support colleges in which, along with other arts and sciences, should be taught "branches of learning related to agriculture and the mechanic arts." Of these colleges, the father and constant friend of the measure, Hon. Justin S. Morrill, was able to say at a festival in his honor last June, "the land grant colleges are now more than equal in numbers to the States of the Union," and "with hardly an exception are doing excellent educational work." By a recent act known as the Hatch bill a supplementary grant has been made to these colleges for the purpose of maintaining experimental stations. Our own legislature at the last session made a small appropriation in a tentative sort of way, for the same purpose. For more than fifteen years the State has maintained this Board of Agriculture for the same general purpose. The State University has done a large amount of work in the same direction. Besides providing the required courses of instruction within its walls, it has sent its professors and other experts and specialists throughout the State to meet and address the farmers at their homes. It has maintained with increasing success a winter course of lectures to farmers at Burlington. And this year it has invited to a laboratory course all farmers and farmers' sons who will come, offering not only free tuition, but all the laboratory facilities and chemicals without cost. So I am sure that we can now with a very good grace advise and urge the farmers of Vermont, and especially the young men, the farmers of the coming generation, to acquire some knowledge of the new farming, to know something about the philosophy of fertilization, and rotation, and nutrition, and something of the many sciences which enter into the farmer's daily employ-

ment. If the study he is able to give them do nothing else—though I am sure it will do much more—it will at least give him the self respect which a man feels who knows something of the why and wherefore of the operations he engages in, and will make him feel that he is something more than a manual laborer, that he is an intelligent, reasoning, and therefore ever interested and ever-improving student and worker in one of the noblest of all the arts.

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